

TRANSCRIPT OF A FILMED INTERVIEW

WITH ROBERT S. McNAMARA AND THEODORE C. SORENSEN

Sorensen: Every American citizen, and particularly those of us in Government, will always remember how we felt when we learned of the discovery of Soviet missiles in the island of Cuba. Secretary McNamara, will you tell us how you felt on that day and what happened?

McNamara: First I think it is fair to say, Ted, that we were surprised. We had the most technically advanced intelligence collection methods in the world, methods which surprised the Soviets with their technical excellence, but it was difficult to discover things before they were actually in place. And I think that our U-2 flights taking pictures of the island of Cuba from a height of 14 miles -- 14 miles in the atmosphere above the land surface -- performed remarkably well to disclose as early as they did the scarring of the earth, which was the first sign of the Soviet intent to place on the isle of Cuba offensive weapons, ballistic weapons with the capability of striking this country. But I know many of the Soviet experts in the Government were as surprised as I was to see the Soviets take the risk they did to affront this nation by putting in Cuba weapons they had promised the world they would not place there. So, surprise was certainly one of our first emotions. And then, of course, it was followed immediately by a sense of the crisis that was bound to develop as a result of this act. Because while it didn't significantly change the military balance, it had great political implications, and it was quite clear to the President, it was quite clear to Robert Kennedy, it was quite clear to the many other members of Government at that time -- that it was absolutely essential to our national interests that these weapons be removed from Cuba, and, of course, we immediately met to consider how to accomplish that objective.

Sorensen: In fact, it was a long series of meetings day and night

McNamara: Continuous meetings for 14 days.

Sorensen: What do you remember of those meetings and of those who participated?

McNamara: Well, the first thing I remember, of course, was the disorganization. Because, as I say, we were surprised that the Soviets acted so rashly to put them there, and the rashness of their act is, of course, measured by the results -- the chief of their government was forced out of office ultimately as a result of that act and the results that followed. But the magnitude of the crisis was first measured by the disorganization of the effort to respond to it. It was so large, so unexpected. It was difficult for us to agree as to how to move, how to meet it. And my most vivid memory of that disorganized period was the role that Robert Kennedy played in organizing the group. It wasn't his function as Attorney General -- he could hardly be thought to be the man responsible for bringing the foreign policy, Defense and Intelligence experts of our Government together to work productively and constructively to develop a response to this threat to our nation. But he did so. And he did it, I think, not in his role as the President's brother. Certainly not in his role as Attorney General, but as a person sensitive to the foreign defense requirements of our nation and sensitive to the responsibility of leadership.

Sorensen: The President finally responded with a rather carefully measured combination of defense and diplomacy. What role did Robert Kennedy have in shaping that policy?

McNamara: Well, first of all let me say, that policy didn't come easily. It wasn't born in an hour, or in a meeting of one day, or a week, as you may remember. It was a result of the most intense debate, the most intense controversy; controversy that at times approached acrimony, but nonetheless was productive ultimately of the right policy. But it was a policy that was not unanimously supported, certainly not initially, perhaps not even at the end. It was but one of several alternatives that were considered. I think initially the majority of the members of the Government perhaps favored a much more dramatic action: an attack by air and ground force of the United States upon the missile bases -- an attack, we all recognized, which once started would broaden into a rather large-scale war on the soil of Cuba. It was an alternative to that that the Maritime blockade was conceived, supplemented with a diplomatic offensive.

In the discussions that led to that final recommendation to the President and his final decision to approve that recommendation, Robert Kennedy played a most important role. I mentioned earlier his role in organizing the effort, and that was fundamental. We had to bring together the disparate views in the Government. We had to bring together the various skills of various parties -- the CIA, the State Department, the Defense Department, the civilian and military, the diplomatic experts -- and he played a major role in organizing and systematizing that effort.

Once it had been organized, his role shifted then into a participant in the debates of strategy. He favored from the outset the use of a maritime blockade, the use of a lesser force than massive air and ground attack, and he favored the lesser force for a number of reasons: He recognized then that a President's prime responsibility is to preserve the nation, the social fabric of a nation, and that one cannot preserve that in a nuclear age by moving into direct confrontation with other nuclear powers. The air and ground attack that had been proposed upon Cuba did run the risk of direct confrontation -- nuclear confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States, a confrontation that could only result in the ultimate destruction of each of those nations and perhaps the civilization of the West. So he was opposed to it for that reason.

He was opposed to it for other reasons, because the air and ground attacks would have resulted in the destruction of thousands of innocent civilian lives in Cuba. It would have resulted in the deaths of thousands of U.S. military personnel. He was opposed to it because he recognized it as contrary to two-hundred years of our traditions and ideals. The inhumanity of it would shock the rest of the world. It would be an act of brutality that we would never be forgiven for. He recognized too, that an act of that kind, if it did not lead to nuclear war, would almost certainly lead to some lesser form of Soviet response -- less than nuclear war, but still very serious and very dangerous to the life of our nation -- a retaliatory act by the Soviets against some vulnerable point along the periphery of NATO, perhaps Berlin. So for all these reasons, he strongly supported the firm application of force, but the application of force and pressure on a measured basis, a basis which allowed the Soviet leaders some room to maneuver, permitted then to avoid a spasmodic response that could have led to the destruction of each of our nations.

Sorensen: Secretary McNamara, would you say that these qualities exhibited by Robert Kennedy on this most critical occasion were consistent with your observations of him as a Government leader and as a human being?

McNamara: Well, I met him for the first time, Ted, in a house on N Street, when President Kennedy first talked to me about joining his cabinet. And I think it was typical that I should have met him under those circumstances. Because from that day forth, during my entire period of association with him in the Government, he played a major role in all of the President's affairs. The President looked upon him as a primary agent of his in the broad range of policy issues across the entire field of governmental activity. I had an extraordinary opportunity to watch him at work. He always displayed the most amazing combination of qualities -- qualities of compassion and wisdom, energy and judgement -- that I found extraordinary. I know of no other individual that I associated with during that time that I had as high a regard for and who influenced to a greater extent the policies of our Government in every field of governmental activity and particularly in the fields I was directly associated with -- foreign policy and defense policy.

Sorensen: Now, you have been in Government more than seven years..

McNamara: Longer than I expected and longer than some would have liked to have seen me there.

Sorensen: Can you explain to me why a man like Robert Kennedy, who has both the wealth and the talent to do many other things, would subject himself to the burdens and pressures of public service?

McNamara: Yes. I think citizens of our nation are moving to a sense of greater responsibility to our nation. I think you see it in the younger generation. You saw it in my generation 30 years ago as a student in college among the medical students. They were driven by a desire to serve humanity and they stood out in that respect from those who went into business or some other form of activity in which they were more concerned with their own financial advancement. In that sense, they were unique. Today, they are not unique because a very high percentage of our young people -- not only our young people, a very high percentage of most of our citizens -- are driven by a desire to serve more than their own personal selfish interests. Certainly, that is the desire of Robert Kennedy. I think he typifies in that sense a growing segment in our population. And I'm delighted to see it at a time of crisis domestically and in foreign affairs, a time when we need not only that sense of public service which he has, but also that underlying compassion for humanity which he has displayed so often in my days of association with him.

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